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PRIVATE PROPERTY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE.¹

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WHILE perhaps no two contemporary writers who advocate socialism or some other species of collectivism have precisely the same conception of the status of property in the better order which they believe is approaching, the majority of them would probably agree that all, or most, forms of property employed in production are to be owned and operated by "society" or "the people" collectively and not distributively and individually. Whether "society" or "the people" denotes national and municipal governments, or the whole human race viewed as a single organic unit, or the united workers of each separate industry (syndicalism) or collective units composed on some different principle, are matters on which contemporary socialists differ. And, indeed, other features demanded by social justice, such as equality of education and other forms of opportunity, probably seem to some collectivists to be more important than the manner in which property is to be held. In general, however, it is safe to say that not only practically all socialists but also most other prophets of a juster and fairer social order agree that the extensive substitution of collective for individual ownership of property used in production is one of the most fundamental tenets of their faith.

All such reformers, no doubt, would concede that collectively owned property must ever be thriftily managed and be made to increase in bulk from one generation to another, so that progress may continue and humanity go forward. Indeed, the total amount of wealth now in

¹ Portions of this paper were read at the joint meeting of the American and Western Philosophical Associations at the University of Chicago last December. In subsequent revision the writer has profited by criticisms made by various speakers who took part in the discussion of the paper then, as well as by suggestions personally offered by Professor J. E. Creighton.

existence must be very greatly increased before the condition of the rank and file of humanity could, even under any form of collectivism, be greatly improved. For even in this, perhaps the richest country in the world, the per capita wealth is pitifully small.² If there were collective ownership of all property today and absolute equality of opportunity, this would only mean collective poverty for all alike. So in order to make collectivistic ideals realisable at all the total amount of wealth, whether in the form of publicly or privately owned property, must be increased many fold.³ Society, all must admit, ought in its collective capacity to possess the virtues of the thrifty bourgeois class, and be a successful accumulator of property. Now if society is to become economical and productive in its collective capacity, the individuals of which society is composed must be economical in their private capacities as individuals. A thrifty society made up of individual spend-thrifts could no more exist than could a just and benevolent society composed of individuals who are selfish and dishonest in their private relations.

In order, however, that a society might count upon its individual citizens being thrifty in their private capacities as individuals, it would always have to permit and foster to some extent individual ownership of private property. Individual citizens would need to have formed the habit of saving and investing a portion of their incomes, and to have felt the joy that comes from experiencing one's savings yield an increment, whether of profit, interest, or rent. We cannot hope that the property owned by a society collectively (if the society were democratically organized) would be managed economically and rendered productive unless the individual citizens had learned to be thrifty and

² Fifteen hundred dollars is the highest estimate I remember having seen. Cf. Spahr, *The Present Distribution of Wealth in the United States* and F. H. Streightoff, *Distribution of Income in the United States*. While written for a different object, these treatises chiefly impress one with the smallness of the total amount of wealth and income possible of distribution.

³ This holds, even if population were to remain stationary, and *a fortiori*, if it continues to increase.

productive in the management of private property. It would not be enough to allow each individual citizen the privileges of private property in his hat and shoes and the furnishings of his apartments. Now would it suffice, as Mr. H. G. Wells has suggested,⁴ to leave little else than the more highly speculative fields to private investment. For if that were done, since individuals in their private capacities had chiefly learned to use capital in speculation, the collectively owned property would also inevitably be handled recklessly, and much of it wasted. If a society is to be thrifty and productive in the management of publicly owned property, its individual citizens would have to be permitted privately to own income-producing capital, and to learn to increase it through their personal care, prudence, and conservative risk.

Whatever our theory of a social mind or social will, we cannot expect that society collectively organized can possess any virtue⁵ which a considerable number of its individual citizens do not possess in their private capacities. And individual citizens cannot possess the virtue of economy unless they have the opportunity to acquire it. This contention will, I believe, be confirmed by a consideration of the conditions under which publicly owned property is managed successfully today. Germany and Switzerland are constantly cited by collectivists as countries where large productive enterprises are publicly owned and successfully managed. But in both countries the government is in the control of the property-owning classes: in Germany because of the peculiar electoral system, and for

⁴ *New Worlds for Old*, Chap. VII. Mr. Wells is extremely indefinite. He recognizes that *some* property should be left to private ownership, but he is guided by no psychological principle such as that advanced in this paper, and is inclined to assign the speculative fields to private ownership.

⁵ Such terms as "virtue," "instinct," "sentiment," "imitation" and "suggestion" are used throughout this paper in technical senses, derived originally from Dr. William McDougall (*An Introduction to Social Psychology*) and Mr. Alex. F. Shand (*Foundations of Character*) and applied by the author to ethical problems. Cf. especially "Ethical Objectivity in the Light of Social Psychology" (*Philosophical Review* Vol. XXII, pp. 395-409) and "The Evolution of Values from Instincts" (*Idem*, Vol. XXIV, pp. 165-183).

other reasons, in Switzerland because of the very general ownership of private property. On the other hand, in American cities, where the majority of voters are not property holders and taxpayers, publicly owned property is as a rule sadly wasted and mismanaged.

Before proceeding to develop the consequences of the position at which we have now arrived, it will be necessary to forestall a variety of objections all of which arise out of a misunderstanding of the relation of the laws of imitation and suggestion to the more basic springs of human action. For instance, an objector might say: "Your argument assumes that an individual must exercise a virtue in a private capacity if he is to exercise it in a public capacity, that he must be personally thrifty in order to appreciate and exercise public thrift. But this is not necessarily the case, for some bank cashiers are economical in the management of the funds of their banks and careless in their private expenses, and some physicians are careful of the health of their patients and careless of their own." Now I am quite willing to admit that a few such bank cashiers and physicians exist. The reason is, that through imitation and suggestion individuals occasionally display the outward manifestations of a virtue or other mental trait before the public, while the virtue really forms no integral part of their characters and does not govern their private conduct. The standards of their colleagues have been adopted by such men through imitation and suggestion and in conformity to the requirements of their employers and patrons (stockholders and depositors and patients) who really do in some measure possess the virtues concerned. If nobody were thrifty there would be no demand for banks; if nobody cared for his health, there would be no call for physicians. Such exceptional instances as this objection advances can only exist because they are exceptions. And I think that we feel some suspicion of such men if we happen to know the inconsistency between their public professions and their private conduct; we feel that their characters are not thoroughly stable and dependable.

Unless a very considerable number of persons in a community possessed and exercised a virtue in their own right, quite apart from influences of imitation and suggestion, even an exceptional few of the rest would not display some of the outward characteristics of the virtue through imitation of them.

A somewhat similar objection is, that in our modern society persons are led to accumulate property by a great many other causes besides what I have called the virtue of economy. Very much accumulation is due to the desire for self-display, to exercise "the will for power," to be esteemed successful; and, indeed, much accumulation is due simply to the sheer inertia and incapacity of many of the very wealthy to spend all of their huge incomes, which in consequence automatically increase already swollen fortunes.⁶ In reply to this, I would say, first, that if all property were publicly owned all of these causes (except possibly the last) mentioned in the objection would cease to operate. Private property must exist to call these motives into operation, and without its existence they would disappear. And, furthermore, it seems to me that these inducements alone would be insufficient, even in the present capitalistic order, to bring very much new wealth into existence. Persons who accumulate property for these reasons do so in more or less direct imitation of those who are thrifty. The tendency to accumulate property begins with persons whose strong acquisitive instincts have crystallized into a sentiment or virtue of economy, and only later is the tendency propagated to other persons who are economical in some phases of their conduct and not in others and who do not directly appreciate the virtue itself.

It must be remembered that imitation and suggestion are never ultimate explanations of social phenomena. They are only the modes in which mental traits possessed by some persons in a marked degree become propagated to others who are naturally less susceptible to them. We have national panics and epidemics of rage only because of

⁶ Cf. J. A. Hobson, *Work and Wealth*, Chap. VIII.

the existence of individuals who possess the instincts of fear and anger in aggravated form, and because of the law that such panics and rages can be propagated from them to others. This sort of contagion is always very instable in its influence and duration. No secure foundation for national thrift in the conservation of public wealth could be furnished by imitation and suggestion, or collective inertia in the expenditure of a large public income. The majority of citizens must really possess the virtue of economy as an integral part of their characters if the society of which they are members is to be economical.

There are only two ways in which it would be psychologically possible for society to hope to manage large amounts of publicly owned property with marked success. The first and simplest would be to restrict the political power to those who are now property holders and so have demonstrated that they possess the virtue of economy. Plutocratic socialisms have existed in the past and have been successful in maintaining themselves and promoting the welfare of the ruling class. Evidently, however, a socialism of this sort is desired by no one today, at least in America. The other way would be more difficult, but I believe ultimately feasible. It would be to enable all individual adult citizens to become owners of private property.

A detailed exposition of the various ways and means by which this latter plan might be effected belongs to another province than that of the philosophical student. It is necessary, however, to touch briefly upon this side of the matter in order to make it clear that what I am advocating lies within the range of practical possibilities. It is really much more practical and less utopian than most radical programs. In the first place, if workers are to be enabled to become small capitalists, their wages must become large enough so that a margin will exist between the expenditures necessary to maintain a reasonable standard of living and their total incomes. Their standard of living of course must not be lowered. In the second place, inducements

must be offered working men to save and to invest this margin. In order to create such a margin where it does not now exist a minimum wage scale in some industries will probably be found desirable, and in others laws and judicial procedure may need to be modified so as to increase the relative strength of labor unions in contests with their employers for higher wages; but as a rule probably the sounder economic course will be to give better opportunities for industrial training to the workmen so as to increase their productiveness and efficiency. The margin doubtless already exists in some of the skilled occupations. In order to induce the workers to save and to invest this margin where it now exists or in the future is made to exist, secure investments at a fair rate of interest must be made accessible to small savers. In view of the fact that a very large portion of the wealth of the country is now held by corporations, their debentures, first subjected to rigid governmental inspection to assure their soundness, ought to be issued in small denominations and so made accessible. In France it is said that many of the best bond issues have for some years been offered in denominations of five hundred francs. The Land Bank about to be organized in New York state is expected to offer interest-bearing notes to the general public in very small denominations—perhaps as low as twenty dollars, and at the same time, through long-time loans to make it easier for tenant farmers to acquire ownership of their farms. Most immigrants to the United States possess the virtue of thrift upon their arrival, and if safe investments were made accessible to them it would be easy to induce them to save and to invest and so to become small capitalists.

What I am urging is not only entirely in harmony with many of the collectivistic proposals urged by socialists and progressives at the present time, but indicates a way by which such reforms could be made to appear more practicable. By all means let us insure workers against sickness, accident, unemployment, old age, and death. It is now objected that such insurance projects are undesirable; first,

because they would remove the chief incentives to industry and economy; secondly, because they are too costly and would necessitate excessive burdens of taxation. But if the opportunity to make safe investments yielding fair interest is offered to workingmen, they will receive a new and substantial inducement to become industrious and economical, and the first objection will no longer hold. Under these circumstances workingmen will learn to regard their labor as an insurable form of productive capital, and acquire increased confidence and self-respect. Fire insurance increases rather than diminishes the thrift of small property holders; labor insurance of laborers who are small capitalists will have a similar effect. The second objection also will no longer hold. For, with a larger proportion of the members of society saving portions of their incomes and bringing new capital into existence, more can be done in the way of social amelioration without increasing present rates of taxation; and at the same time a society composed of thrifty citizens will itself be more efficient in managing collectively owned enterprises and causing them to earn profits that would be available for such purposes.

If such a program as has been suggested were to be carried out it might even ultimately become feasible that society should not only, as it now does, save every one from actual starvation, but also relieve every one from poverty, and provide all children with the best education suited to their talents, supporting them entirely during their schooling when necessary. Such extreme measures of social equality would appear to be psychologically feasible *after* a considerable portion of the laboring classes had once formed a taste for the accumulation of income producing capital and for the luxuries which its ownership would afford them in addition to their wages and the minimum of comfort guaranteed by society to every one. For under such conditions as I have indicated there would be the same stimulus to save and become a small capitalist that there now is to work and avoid pauperism. Indeed I am utopian enough to imagine that it might even become a slight social

disgrace for an able-bodied workingman *not* to own some interest-bearing securities that he had acquired by savings from his wages!

It is therefore clear that very many of the ways in which socialists hope to benefit the lot of humanity can be ultimately attained, if, while society accumulates and operates an increased amount of productive property, individuals are induced in increasing numbers to accumulate more private wealth also.

The facts of moral evolution as set forth by historians of morality and social psychologists will be found to support this conclusion. Such writers generally agree that the virtues of justice and benevolence were at first only practices within small personal groups. Sutherland, Westermarck, and McDougall attribute the origin of altruism to the parental instinct. And while Professor Graham Wallas⁷ may be right in objecting that a certain amount of kindly feeling is probably instinctively felt apart from the operation of the parental instinct or any of its modifications, still, since all instincts are at first fugitive in their attachment to objects no deep and lasting habit or sentiment of kindness could have developed toward strangers, since they are not continuous objects of stimulation sufficient to build up sentiments. So, however much instinctive kindly emotions toward those outside family or other close and familiar relations may have been occasionally felt, instinctive altruism could not have developed into a lasting sentiment without the support of the family instincts.

The advance of social reform, dependent as it is upon the increased accumulation of private as well as of public property, is somewhat endangered by some arguments and proposals, advanced by well meaning but not sufficiently reflective radicals. Most of the elementary text-books in logic give as an instance of fallacious reasoning attributed to Malthus the proposal that, in view of the fact that the owners of cows are industrious, the poor could be made industrious by presenting them with cows. The fallacy of

⁷ *The Great Society*, pp. 140-149.

course is that of mistaking an effect for a cause, and supposing that thrift itself could be induced by the acquisition in some other way of the effects of thrift. No one today would be guilty of this fallacy in so crude a form. But the reported hope of the Italian syndicalists that by a general strike or revolution the industries in which laborers are now employed may be made to pass into their ownership, and that thereafter the new owners of the industries will operate them economically involves the same fallacy. The hope of syndicalists that workmen may ultimately come to own, or at least largely to share in the ownership, of the factories in which they are employed is a hope in which, for one, I heartily share. But if this is ever brought about, it will be by the workers gradually, by their own thrift and industry and the management of smaller amounts of property, having acquired the skill and self-control to manage the extensive instruments of production used in their own industries. In a similar way, if municipalities or the nation as a whole are to own and successfully operate public utilities on a large scale, these utilities should be bought and paid for by capital accumulated through public management. An inexperienced commonwealth that precipitately took over railways, mines, or factories by confiscation or expropriation, or paid for them with the proceeds of heavy taxes on inheritances or unearned increments in land would be utterly unable to operate them economically. When reformers favor the acquisition of public utilities through such procedures, and not through the discipline of earning profits by management itself, they are guilty of the fallacy of the cows in a subtler form.⁸

Other agitation that is psychologically as well as economically pernicious is the indiscriminating attack upon all forms of profit, rent, and interest as exploitation of the laboring classes. If, as I have been urging, the great desideratum is to bring more capital into existence in order that there may be more wealth to be distributed and con-

⁸ Even so generally reasonable writers as Spargo and Arner (*Elements of Socialism*) do not realize this. (Cf. ch. xxiv.)

sumed, we must not cast aspersions upon the part performed by capital in production or deny to capital its rewards. On the other hand, we should enable the laborers by their own efforts to become capitalists, so that the incomes which they now receive from their labor may be supplemented by incomes which they will receive as capitalists. In that manner present inequalities may be largely reduced, and the proportionate amount of the fruits of production now received by the working classes may be greatly increased without tampering in any way with property rights. The rights of property need to be made secure—and extended to assure security to the small investor—in order to afford to every adult human being the opportunity to develop his personality by becoming an owner of income-producing property.

A socialistic writer who displays keen psychological and philosophical insight is Mr. William English Walling.⁹ With very many of Mr. Walling's conceptions, including his acceptance of pragmatism, the present writer finds himself in hearty concord. Like Mr. Walling, he believes that we are entering an epoch in which, at the same time that more wealth is becoming publicly owned, small capitalists are coming into general control of conditions. Like Mr. Walling, he also believes that this change is effecting a general improvement of conditions, not only for the small capitalist class, but also for the working classes. But, unlike Mr. Walling, he does not believe that the era of small capitalism will ever need to be superseded in its turn by eras of a radically different character. It seems to him that Mr. Walling has assumed this last through a failure to contemplate the possibility that during the course of the era of small capitalism all may become small capitalists. Every worker may be enabled by his industry and thrift to become an enjoyer of income from his capital as well as from his wages. One suspects that Mr. Walling has failed to take this possibility into account because he has not wholly emancipated himself from the fallacy that

⁹ *Socialism As It Is; The Larger Aspects of Socialism; Progressivism and After.*

capital necessarily owes its existence to exploitation, and that, so long as there are small capitalists, there must also be a propertyless class whom they are exploiting.

Perhaps another reason why Mr. Walling has not perceived the possibility of the outcome for which this paper contends is that he has not wholly assimilated one of the consequences of the pragmatism which he professes—a view, by the way, that Bergson and many idealists also hold—*viz.*, that the future is not a mere repetition of the past, but an enlargement of it in every way, and that consciousness exercises a creative function in this process of growth. Pragmatism, as well as most forms of idealism, teaches that reality is no closed or fixed system of absolute entities that cannot become enlarged both quantitatively and qualitatively; the world is rather the product of creative effort, and is largely what we make it. It seems to me that it follows from this that property, like other aspects of human personality, is not a fixed quantity. There is almost no limit to the amount of property that can be brought into existence through individual and collective efforts. In order that the present propertyless classes may be benefited it is not necessary that they should, through public expropriation of some sort, come into the possession of any property *now* owned by individuals (without fully compensating the present owners with other income-producing property). All that is necessary is that society as a whole, and the propertyless as individuals, should create *new* wealth, in addition to that now in existence, and this they can readily learn to do under juster social arrangements. If the possible amount of wealth were a fixed quantity, the only way that the “have not’s” could acquire any of it would be at the expense of the “have’s.” The “class war” would follow as a corollary. But full acceptance of pragmatism should lead to the recognition of still “larger aspects of socialism” than those set forth in Mr. Walling’s admirable volume of that title. Pragmatism should emancipate socialists from superstitions of “class war,” of “class consciousness,” of capital as necessarily the fruit

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of exploitation, of rent, profit, and interest as necessarily immoral, and of other absolutistic conceptions that are now no longer tenable in view of the larger interpretations of reality, and the place of human personality in it.¹⁰

It is possible to state a portion of the argument of this paper so as to develop some additional ethical implications. Every reformer, we may suppose, desires society to be moral and rational in its collective capacity. The general will must be firm and self-controlled, and must plan for future good, unswayed by momentary passions. Only by being thoroughly rational can society be free. Hegel and Green would state this idea in metaphysical terms; Professor Graham Wallas¹¹ would say more simply that thought must be the guiding force of our society. The decisions of society must be the outcome of rational, self-controlled, farsighted deliberation. But no democratic society can possess such a character as this implies unless the majority of its citizens in their private capacities possess strong, self-controlled characters. Now an important way—of course not the only one—in which an individual person can acquire foresight, self-control, and powers of reasoned calculation and learn not to allow his emotions and passing desires to sway his decisions is in the management of private property. The management of a certain and calculable income from a salary of course in part, but I think only in part, serves the same function in this respect as private property.

I have stated the argument throughout this paper with

¹⁰ Mr. Walling, to be sure, seems to see this dimly. Hence his assertion that socialism is not a "class struggle," but an "anti-class struggle." (*Larger Aspects of Socialism*, p. xiii.) But in the same breath he insists in italics that "socialism is a struggle of those who have less, against those who have more, than equal opportunity would afford," and the general account in *Progressivism and After* characterizes social evolution as a warfare against privileged classes, and gives the general impression that those who have less than equal opportunity are to benefit chiefly through heavy taxation of those who have more, and through the abolition of the rights of bequest and inheritance, and not through themselves learning to produce and accumulate new wealth on their own account.

¹¹ *The Great Society*, Chapters X, XI.

reference chiefly to the laboring classes. It applies with even more force to members of the intellectual classes. Would not society be greatly benefited if its intellectual and moral leaders were paid large enough salaries, so that, without lowering the standard of living requisite for efficiency in their callings, they were enabled to save and to accumulate property, and so to make their personalities more concrete and social? This is clearly true of teachers. The undesirability of the corps of instructors in an educational institution being wholly or chiefly celibates is often remarked. Are not the disadvantages of a propertyless faculty equally serious? The low moral standards of the modern business world are frequently censured by moralists. But is not the low level of business morality—in those respects in which it really is low, it is high in others—due to the fact that the moral leaders of our time are almost completely ignorant of business conditions, and so are unable to offer any really practical suggestions? The propertyless moralist and clergyman are too ignorant to do more than in a wholesale manner to denounce the love of money as the root of all evil, and there is nothing at all constructive about this. No wonder business men often conclude that religion and morality bear no relation to business. Our commercial and industrial morality can only become uplifted and enlightened when the prophets of our times shall have personal acquaintance with the acquirement and investment of property.

“Private property is the unity of life in its external or material form; the result of past dealing with the material world, and the possibility of future dealing with it; the general or universal means of possible action and expression corresponding to the moral self that looks before and after, as opposed to the momentary wants of a child or animal.”¹² If, therefore, a social reformer thinks that society in its collective capacity ought to possess “a moral self that looks before and after” he should realize that the best way to attain this is to promote a general ownership

¹² B. Bosanquet, *Aspects of the Social Problem*, p. 311.

of private property among individual citizens. In this connection the rights of inheritance and bequest are also, within limits, to be insisted upon as expressions of the moral personalities of individuals. A man's wife, children, and near kin are members of his moral self, and his property ought to pass to them undiminished by *excessive* death duties. Society can only be expected to be morally capable of conserving publicly owned wealth and of passing it increased in bulk to the next generation on condition that the individual citizens of which it is composed are in their private capacities endeavoring to accumulate property and to pass it on to their descendants.

Perhaps, however, some one may still object that although certain virtues attend the ownership of private property, this institution none the less tends to render men cold, hard, greedy, avaricious, and selfish, and that it is therefore on the whole antagonistic to the development of the larger moral life. Private ownership should therefore ultimately be abolished in favor of exclusive public ownership. This argument, which has never been more trenchantly advanced than in the *Republic* of Plato, has been refuted in the *Politics* of Aristotle. Plato, more logical than many modern detractors of property, saw that precisely the same objections apply to the monogamous family, which also appears to narrow the range of interests and sympathies of its members, and to make them hard, cold, selfish, and indifferent to the outside world. Plato therefore thought that the guardians, if deprived of monogamous family life, would indiscriminately love all the children of the next generation as if they were their own; and, in like manner, that, deprived of private possessions, they would disinterestedly conserve the public property as if it were their own. The spirit of Aristotle's refutation, restated in a modern psychological manner, is, that those who have no intimate personal relationship with a few children cannot acquire the parental virtues at all, and those who have no property of their own cannot acquire the virtue of economy. On the other hand, through moral

education we may lead parents and others to extend to children in general a virtue which they have first acquired with reference to the children in their immediate care, and through moral education we may likewise lead capitalists to extend the virtue of economy to publicly owned property. The Platonic method of securing disinterested love of society on the part of its guardians was given a partial trial in the case of the celibate, propertyless monks of the middle ages, and proved a failure. The Aristotelian method rests upon a sounder psychology, and is more in harmony with the modern spirit. Let us grant that individual owners of private property, like individual fathers of families, are often too narrow in the range of their sympathies, and hence become hard and cold toward matters of public good. The remedy for this is to lead them to extend their range of interest to the property held by society as a whole. Once a virtue has been brought into existence within a narrow range, its scope may gradually become extended with further development. But a virtue can only arise and begin its development within a narrow personal circle. All our knowledge of moral evolution abundantly shows this to be the case.

We may therefore conclude that the aims of social justice and the right to private property are compatible. Only that society could be called truly social in which every individual enjoyed free opportunity to develop his personality in every important respect, including a liberal education and the acquisition of private income-producing property.

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